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INTERPRETATION, INC.

Issues In Contemporary Film Studies

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Film Interpretation Revisited

David Bordwell

After people see a film, they often talk about it. Sometimes they write or give lectures about it. At least some of the things people say or write count as interpretations in anybody's sense of that term. But what enables people to produce those linguistic constructs we call film interpretations? What are, we might say, the psychological, social, and historical conditions which make this possible?

It was this question which led me to write *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (1989; hereafter *MM*). There I tried to set out a theoretical analysis of the activity of film interpretation. I take this opportunity to summarize and clarify the position staked out there, to examine some objections made to it, and to conclude with some general thoughts about "Interpretation, Inc." and the current state of film studies.

1.

Before tracing the argument, it is useful to say what it doesn't do. It is not centrally a history or analysis or diagnosis of academic film study, as some readers (and some writers in these pages) have thought. Certainly I argue that if we are to understand the conditions of possibility of interpretation, we must take into account the social institution of academic film studies. That institution has played a crucial role in establishing and monitoring interpretive activities. But to consider all the factors which impinge on the practical teaching of film would not have been pertinent to my enterprise. *MM* is a history of academic film study only insofar as that study is bound up with interpretation.

Interpretation remains a vast and controversial topic in the humanities.[1] *MM* does not tackle many of the knotty philosophical problems in the literature. Here is one cluster: Can an interpretation be true or false, valid or invalid? Or are interpretations only plausible or implausible?[2] *MM* remains agnostic on this issue. What interested me was how even far-fetched interpretations could be produced and promulgated within a disciplinary field.[3]

Here is another cluster of philosophical problems, much discussed in the literary community (particularly in the wake of deconstruction).[4] Can no interpretation be invalid? Can the text bear an infinity of interpretations? If not, how many interpretations are permissible? On what grounds can one justify excluding an interpretation? Once again, *MM* holds these questions in abeyance, for they bear on the right or best way of doing interpretation—something to which I don't have an answer—rather than on the principles and procedures by which actual interpretations, good or bad, are generated and disseminated.

Some clarity may be gained if I restate the project's logic in a fashion different from that set out in the book. Consider, then, a choice-chart which allows us to plot the assumptions behind the book and the alternative positions which I can imagine. Each of the seven questions which follow allows us to get more specific about the book's argument while also marking off alternative positions.

1. Is it fruitful to consider film criticism a reasonably distinct practice within all writing and teaching about cinema?

MM assumes that it is.[5] If you think not, you are in effect saying that it is not fruitful to distinguish, at least approximately, among, say, film criticism, film theory, and film history. I have not seen any explicit arguments along these lines.

2. Is it fruitful to consider interpretation a reasonably distinct practice within film criticism?

If you think not, I suppose that two principal positions are open to you.

The first is an "everything is messy" position: Who can distinguish interpretive activities from all the other activities which critics perform? It's all criticism, and there is no principled way to distinguish interpretation from, say, description, analysis, or evaluation.

Several considerations militate against this view. Most evidently, all practicing critics draw such distinctions even if they do not acknowledge them explicitly. No critic thinks that saying "*The Godfather* is a

gangster film" is not significantly different from saying, "*The Godfather* is a good gangster film." Critics can agree that *Hamlet* has five acts while arguing about whether its hero has an Oedipus complex. In the give and take of critical discussion, critics tacitly distinguish interpretations from other kinds of statements about art works.

A second position takes the view that interpretation is not a reasonably distinct practice within film criticism because film criticism is synonymous with interpretation. That *Hamlet* has five acts, that it was published in 1603 in a "bad quarto," that its hero has been a student, that its hero has an Oedipus complex, that the play is an allegory of the inadequacy of language to the world—any statement you wish to make about the play counts as an interpretation.

Why would anyone believe this? Sociologically, perhaps what I shall be calling interpretation has been so central to criticism in the humanities that interpretation has come to be synonymous with criticism itself. But there are other reasons as well, I think, and they rest upon a certain equivocation.

Some people say that every perceptual act is shot through with "interpretation" because there is no innocent eye, that every observation is "theory-laden," that every statement presupposes a construal of the world and of language. All these assumptions seem to me very likely true, but "interpretation" used in this sense comes down to denoting a set of assumptions, presuppositions, categories, beliefs, and the like. *MM* argues that such conceptual structures are indeed ingredient to critical interpretation in the narrower sense. That is, in order to make a statement about a film's abstract meanings, one must have categories and concepts, and at least some preliminary sorting of data. Call all this background structure "interpretation" if you like, but then recognize that I am using interpretation in a different (and no less commonly accepted) sense. It is fallacious to claim that because everything involves "interpretation" in the broadest sense, it is impossible to distinguish an activity we can call interpretation in the narrower sense.[6]

Contrary to these two views, *MM* assumes that interpretation can be treated as a distinct practice within film criticism. It is distinguished on two dimensions. Both seem to me to accord with traditional hermeneutic distinctions and with current critical thinking and usage.

First, hermeneuticians have long distinguished between "literal" construals and others which go beyond the "letter" of the text (*MM*, 1-2). I call the former "comprehension." That is, some beliefs or talk about a film postulates something concretely there—say, the characters represented, the action of the story, and the dramatic point or significance of it all. Comprehension grasps the meanings denoted by

the text and its world. Here are some examples:

> In this scene, Roger Thornhill is trying to evade the crop-dusting plane.
>
> Dorothy's "There's no place like home" is the moral of the movie.

Interpretation, by contrast, ascribes *abstract* and nonliteral meanings to the film and its world. It ascribes a broader significance, going beyond the denoted world and any denoted message to posit implicit or symptomatic meanings at work in the text.

> In this scene, Roger Thornhill is pursued by a phantom of the father he is seeking.
>
> Dorothy's "There's no place like home" is the attempt of the discourse to repress the disruptive challenge to domestic life represented by the utopia of Oz and the threatening mother figure of the Wicked Witch.

As these hypothetical examples indicate, interpretive statements often piggyback on comprehension; to construct a symptomatic reading of *The Wizard of Oz*, one makes assumptions about what it says explicitly.

Please notice that the comprehension/interpretation distinction does not map straightforwardly onto the distinction between experiencing the film on the first pass and reflecting upon it at leisure. Comprehension may be central to ordinary viewing, but certain groups of viewers might well make interpretive moves while watching a film for the first time. (I am sure that some professional critics do.) Similarly, some films may well require interpretive leaps for their full enjoyment or satisfaction, in which case comprehension takes one only so far. (These films are often "art movies" or experimental films.)

The comprehension/ interpretation distinction allows us to see that construing interpretation only in the broad sense will not do justice to discriminable claims that people make. If interpretation comes down to all sorts of judgments of significance, or inferences of any kind, then of course comprehension is "interpretation" too. But we can preserve a useful and habitual distinction between, say, following the story and ascribing an abstract, implicit or symptomatic, meaning to that story, by using the concept of interpretation in a narrower sense.

When talking about critical activities, it is also useful to distinguish interpretation from evaluation and analysis. Few critics will, I think, quarrel with the claim that an interpretation is not necessarily an

evaluation (although the relation of interpretation to value is not by any means clear). More people will object to separating analysis from interpretation.

Yet there is a principled difference between pointing out pertinent relations of parts and wholes (analysis) and positing abstract meanings (interpretation). You can analyze composition and color in a painting, melodic motifs and harmonic texture in a musical piece, prosody and plot in literature, and so on. Your analysis need not be guided by interpretive assumptions (using interpretation in the sense I have adopted), and there need not be an interpretive payoff. If you show patterns in the spatial relations of shots across a sequence, you are producing an analysis. You may make the interpretive move of ascribing an abstract meaning to the patterns you disclose, but you could also stay at the analytical level, perhaps by discussion of denotative and diegetic functions which these patterns perform.

Again, distinguishing interpretation from analysis is traditional.[7] Some may find analysis arid or boring [8] and find interpretation exciting. But disparaging analysis in favor of interpretation presupposes that the distinction between the two holds good, and that is all I need at this stage.

3. Does interpretation, like other activities, depend upon a characteristic set of skills?

Hammering a nail requires grasping the hammer, lining up the nail, making a few strokes without whacking the fingers that are steadying the nail, and hitting the nailhead straight and true. Making a fishbowl disappear depends on timing gestures, misdirecting the audience, and tripping mechanisms that will create the illusion.[9] Both hammering a nail and doing stage magic are skilled activities, although one may be fairly easy to learn and the other may be very hard.

MM assumes that film interpretation, considered as a practice, requires a characteristic set of skills. For example, critics compare a film's beginning with its ending; they ascribe themes to films; they find patterns of motifs and fill in gaps. At least some of these skills are likely to be learned, though not necessarily in formal teaching situations. Moreover, they can be present in greater or lesser degrees of adequacy. One can be more or less skillful in interpreting films, hammering nails, or making things disappear.

I suppose that this premise could be denied, but I cannot presently see any grounds for it.

4. Are at least some of the skills and practices characteristic of interpretation conceptual?

MM takes the view that all criticism involves deliberative activity. The critic selects a film, thinks about it, frames comments about it. Interpretation, as a part of criticism, must be conceptual too. More strongly, *MM* argues that interpretation requires some particular, although not necessarily unique, conceptual skills. For instance, the critic must notice analogies, recall exemplars, compare moments in the film, frame an argument, and so on. These activities involve concepts.

It would be possible to argue that no concepts mediate the exercise of interpretive skill. A Wittgensteinian might take the view that one "just goes on," as a carpenter or magician might, without any theories about what one is doing. But note here that I am not suggesting that these concepts are *theoretical*. Indeed, it is ingredient to my case at later stages that many skills characteristic of interpretation are conceptual without being theoretical. They are often "intuitive"—not in the sense that no concepts are required, but in the sense that the concepts in play are so familiar that one can apply them without conscious attention. Presumably intuition is thought, and employs concepts.

5. Are the conceptual skills and practices significantly cognitive and rhetorical?

"Cognitive" here carries no doctrinal weight. It demarcates certain kinds of mental activities: information-gathering, argument-framing, deliberation, reasoning, inference, judgment, debate, and comparable activities. You can grant that these are cognitive without subscribing to any particular theoretical explanation for them. (Freud has one account, Piaget another.) Similarly, if we simply assume rhetoric to be the craft of persuasive discourse, we are not yet assuming any particular rhetorical theory for describing or analyzing it.

You don't have to embrace a thick-skinned rationalist position to grant that cognitive faculties play a significant role in interpretation. In turn, I freely grant that the critic might choose to interpret a film because s/he loves it, and that love may not be reducible to conceptual, let alone cognitive, factors. By the same token, though, we need not sharply split emotional from cognitive processes. You chose the film out of love; but still, you chose, and the weighing of alternatives, of costs and benefits, may well have shaped the decision. Moreover, to love a film involves making conceptual judgments (that this is a certain sort of film, that it has certain qualities, that certain expressive states are present in it, and so on).[10]

The view advanced in *MM* is this: Interpretation of the sort which I have set out to explain does involve cognitive activities. While they are

not the whole story, they play a significant role in interpretive practice. Interpreters gather information in a nonrandom way: they take notes, investigate other films by the same director or in the same genre, search out interviews and other interpretations in the library. Interpreters frame arguments, guided by the end in view (setting out a case) and conscious of prior work and possible objections. Interpreters deliberate, pondering anomalous data or considering alternative ways of presenting their evidence. Interpreters make inferences—about what characters' dialogue might mean, about what a shot implies, about how the film's narrative avoids ideological contradictions. Interpreters judge films to belong to a tradition, a genre, a tendency. Interpreters also debate other interpreters, trying to prove the validity of this or that interpretation. These mundane activities are cognitive through and through, both in the skills they presuppose and the faculties they exercise .

An alternative position would, I think, be that of the Surrealists' "irrational enlargement" of films they saw. Slipping into the theatre in the middle of the movie, free-associating on the basis of enticing bits, glorying in misremembering—these activities sought to diminish the cognitive side of film interpretation.

I cannot offer a rigorous rebuttal of this as a critical practice. I can only say that as the history of film criticism developed, this version of Surrealist criticism has proven marginal to the activity I set out to explain: the ways in which ordinary viewers, journalistic critics, and academic critics talk and write about movies. Nevertheless, it may be that the scheme I propose will explain *why* Surrealist criticism of this stripe is significantly different from the mainstream varieties. I suspect that this lies exactly in the centrality of the cognitive factors.

As for rhetoric, I take it that the effort to persuade others of a position is part and parcel of the critic's task. It may be one of the chief qualities that sets journalistic and academic interpretation apart from ordinary comment and opinion swapping after seeing a movie. Again the Surrealists' writings may offer a counterexample—they may not have been seeking to persuade anyone—but again I am inclined to consider them atypical of the activities I am trying to track.

6. Are the cognitive skills and activities and the rhetorical processes involved likely to be illuminated by a cognition-based theory?

That is, isn't a theory which seeks to explain cognition a prime candidate for enlightening us about the cognitive and rational-deliberative aspects of interpretation? *MM* argues that such is the case. It

draws on a broadly "cognitivist" perspective to analyze and explain characteristic interpretive moves.

There is a widespread assumption that cognitivist theorizing of this sort is wholly and only psychological. This assumption is false.[11] The cognitivist frame of reference has emerged in sociology, cultural anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, and the history of science. What distinguishes this perspective, I think, is the belief that procedures of reasoning (not necessarily *logical* reasoning) and mental representation play a crucial role in social and cultural activities. In this respect, the assumption is parallel to that which has governed much film theorizing since the mid-1970s—that psychic processes play a crucial role in the same sorts of activities, and that Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis shed light on that role. Cognitive processes are shared by social agents, and some cognitive capacities (e. g., grammar) emerge only in a social context. Cognitive activities are individual and collective, personal and social all at once.

I would encourage somebody who has come this far down the choice-chart's path but who finds Answer no. 6 unacceptable to offer a non-cognitive account of interpretive cognition. The evident alternative is some conative, or drive-centered account, and an obvious candidate would issue from some version of psychoanalysis. Perhaps such an account would treat interpretive activities as involving defense, repression, and sublimation. I am not aware that any such account of film interpretation has ever been launched. I would be interested in seeing one worked out to the same degree of detail presented in *MM*.

7. Does *Making Meaning*'s version of a "cognitivist theory do the job? That is, does it offer an adequate analysis and explanation of the characteristic cognitive skills and activities involved in interpretation?

We come to the marrow of the book.

3.

Let us take as an example of film interpretation the remarks on *Salo* offered by Robin Wood in his essay. They are sketchy and do not manifest the range and richness of which film interpretation is capable; but it will serve as a quick example.

Wood inquires as to what could have created the effect of disgust and depression he felt in seeing the film. "What does *Salo* do that no other fictional film (to my knowledge) has done?" His answer is that the film obliges the spectator to participate in a process of wielding absolute

power in a dehumanizing way. This is done not only in what is represented—the coldness of the torturers, for example—but through technical devices, such as the use of point-of-view shots which give us the optical vantage points of the organizers as they watch through binoculars from their eyrie. "We are forced into a physical identification we emotionally reject."

In brief compass Wood offers a paradigmatic instance of what I consider the problem-solving impetus behind criticism. The critic asks: Given this felt quality or effect or import, how can we account for it? This is a rational question involving cognitive criteria; to answer it one must make judgments about the relation of cause to effect, means to ends, part to whole. Just as paradigmatically, Wood looks "within the film" for an answer in terms of what the film does or accomplishes. He does not, for instance, research the production of the film, interview the participants, and offer a historical account of what particular choices might have eventuated in the effect he registered.

Wood answers his question by ascribing broader meaning to the film. While there are presumably other films that are as viscerally shocking as *Salo*, what creates the force Wood felt is a larger significance. The film is "about" the inhuman exercise of absolute power, wielded by father figures and informed by an ideology of masculinist authority characteristic of fascism but also at large in contemporary society. Through techniques of performance, point-of-view, and the like, the viewer is implicated in a spectacle manifesting this significance.

My statement is reductive, but I take it as a fair approximation of Wood's conclusion. What has enabled Wood to ascribe this meaning to the film? *MM* argues that critics apply conceptual structures of a general nature to cues—items, actions, stylistic features—discriminated within the film. Most broadly, the conceptual structures are abstract *semantic fields:* absolute power, the Father, masculinism, authority, fascism. On the screen, a figure is a man; it is the critic who makes an inference and declares that the man is a father figure, or a symbol of masculine authority. On the screen, boys are boys; it is the critic who sees them as "sons" and "Hitler youth." These are prototypes of interpretive inferences, and some such semantic fields seem necessary if the conclusion is to acquire the generality characteristic of an interpretation.

In order to answer his question, Wood uses several other concepts to discriminate among his data. He focuses on persons and assumes that one should pay attention to the ways they look and act; he employs categories of youth and age, male and female; he invokes notions of identification, of closeness/ distance, of emotional versus

physical qualities. They are what *MM* calls *schemata*: knowledge structures which social agents possess in order to act.

These schemata are part and parcel of the critics' equipment. Some, such as the idea of identification, are rather specialized to the critical institutions. Many come into play in what I am calling comprehension. (Comprehension is partly a cognitive process too.[12]) Note that Wood did not have to select these particular schemata; he could have elaborated a contrast between colors in the film, or between tall and short characters; that is, he could have deployed an indefinitely large number of other schemata. But the schemata he employs correspond to those circulating in the field and mesh with the large-scale semantic fields he maps onto the film.

Wood also employs reasoning routines. He infers the characters' states of mind from their appearance and behavior, and then he assumes that those states of mind are to be taken as contributing to the film's broader implication. Thus the fascists are said to be aware that their power is only an illusion, and this quality of illusory spectacle figures in the interpretation. Wood also assumes that when a film supplies a character's point of view that we are to identify with that character, no matter how repellant. He assumes that physical distance is paralleled by emotional "distance" ("coldness"), while physical proximity creates, indeed enforces, some psychological intimacy with characters, however disturbing this may be.

MM calls such reasoning routines *heuristics*. Based more in common experience than deductive logic, they are procedures which connect textual cues, schemata, and semantic fields. Some are culturally widespread; others are specialized, domain-specific strategies. Inferring states of mind from characters' actions is a very broad human reasoning strategy, but aspiring critics must learn that the film may also be "about" the general aspects of these states of mind.

Wood's remarks on *Salo* exemplify the problem-solving process which *MM* argues to be at the center of film interpretation. Prodded by a question, Wood fastens on cues within the film and maps semantic fields onto them with the aid of schemata and heuristics. He is right to say that this is not theoretical work, since he makes no effort to analyze the concepts he employs (masculinity, Oedipus, fascism) and since no such analysis is necessary to a fresh and plausible interpretation.

My invocation of semantic fields, schemata, and heuristics raises one common objection. All these are in a sense "outside" the film; I seem to be arguing that the critic "imposes" structures of meaning on the film rather than discovering meanings in the film or letting meaning

grow out of the film. *MM* argues that films do not harbor meanings "inside" or "behind" them; how could they? Interpretation is an interaction of critic and film. What the critic brings to this engagement is human perceptual equipment, cultural experience and values, tacit norms of comprehension, and a repertory of knowledge structures and critical procedures for building an interpretation out of cues which she or he discriminates in the film. We don't just see meanings, literal or interpretive; the critic *constructs* meaning through a complex process of assumption, testing, projection, inferential trial and error, and comparable activities. Both comprehension and interpretation are inferential activities. Meaning is made, not found.

So, an objector might ask, where do new meanings come from? According to *MM*, it might seem that the critic can only see what s/he is primed and prepared to see. But to say that people perceive and understand through mental constructs—categories, assumptions, and the like—is not to say that they don't expand their cognitive repertoire through encounter with the world. Our cognitive resources are not cookie cutters, and the world is not soft dough; we do not stamp out the same shape in every transaction with reality. When we learn anything, on this account, we start with rough and approximate constructs. We increase them in number or expand their scope or refine them in delicacy as we find that they do not discriminate sufficiently among the data we encounter. Thus the critic confronts what *MM* calls "recalcitrant data," which forces her or him to adjust or revise or reject overly simple frames of reference. The institution of criticism, by insisting on nuance and comprehensiveness as criteria of good criticism, likewise exercises some pressure not to treat films too reductively.

This objection is related to another one: Films undeniably provoke us to create new interpretations, but the account in *MM* takes as its model the most formulaic "readings," not the ones which struggle to achieve a complex and rich coherence. True, *MM* set out to talk about interpretation in general, not only the best or most enlightening interpretations. Still, the book does propose that the variety and richness of critical interpretations come from an interplay of schemata and semantic fields. The expert critic has mastered several productive resources of making meaning and is able to mesh them in a way which captures a great deal of the text's detail. But this skill relies nonetheless on the same basic moves executed by less skilful critics.

Wood's remarks on *Salo* also exemplify the rhetorical side of interpretation. He writes in an effort to persuade, and the argument is structured to facilitate that. He employs a *persona*—the left-wing intellectual acutely concerned about the state of the world—and builds

up the ethos of this persona through linguistic devices. He also creates an intimacy with the reader by taking the reader into his confidence, tracing the fluctuations in his attitudes toward the film. By using "we" to describe the reactions and construals of his posited spectator, he creates a sense that several spectators respond to the film in the way he delineates, and the pronoun is usefully ambiguous in suggesting that Wood's persona speaks for his relation to a group and/or his relation to the reader.

I am *not* saying that in using these rhetorical resources Wood is insincere. Rhetoric is not simply a neutral tool; it can be guided by deep feelings and passionate commitment. But rhetoric is communication, and the rhetor must exercise skill in order to move the reader or listener toward the position advocated. No one can read Wood's piece without seeing it, I think, as overtly and powerfully rhetorical, using many resources of language and inference to win the spectator to his view. And his remarks on *Salo* seem utterly characteristic of the rhetorical side of film interpretation, at least as *MM* understands them.

There is of course more to be commented on in Wood's discussion of the film. I am particularly interested in the strategy, common in post-1960s film interpretation, of finding that whereas some films must be read symptomatically in order to reveal their grasp of social contradictions (is *Gaslight* an example for Wood?), other films, such as *Salo*, have already achieved that grasp, are not read symptomatically, and are instead treated as implicitly delineating the social contradictions. But surely *Salo* could also be read symptomatically, by someone with another conception of strategically adjusted contradictions. (See *MM*, pp. 100-104.)

Finally, one more point must be stressed. The inferential materials and moves I've traced—conceptual structures like schemata and semantic fields, procedures like heuristics, rhetorical strategies and tactics—all are not merely psychological but equally and thoroughly social. Interpretive skills are formed in and transmitted through institutions. Schemata and semantic fields and heuristics are shared. Some may be "contingent universals," cross-cultural modes of thought and action that arise from the demands of collective human life (e.g., the person-schema). Others are doubtless specific to certain cultures or historical periods.

Schemata, semantic fields, and heuristics achieve their cogency and convincingness through readers and listeners' tacit agreements; they are promoted or rejected by social groups. It is no disparagement of Wood's remarks to say that their inferential bases have developed within institutions of film criticism. Apart from particular doctrines (e.g.,

"Leavisism" or the political views expressed in *CineAction!*), the interpretive schemata, semantic fields, heuristics, and rhetorical devices employed in Wood's brief discussion are part and parcel of academic film study[13].

4.

Most theories don't survive long, so the odds are against *MM*'s being right in all or even most respects. The assumptions I've sketched out in the choice-chart may not be watertight, and it is still less likely that the detail-work of the book—the itemization of major semantic fields, schemata, heuristics, and rhetorical strategies—is invulnerable to criticism. I want here to consider the most vigorous and sweeping criticism that the book's argument has received.

In a review essay, V. F. Perkins has offered many specific objections, several unfortunately resting on misleading accounts of *MM*'s position.[14] He also raises some issues which I have discussed earlier in this essay, and some which I will address in the following section. In this section I want to outline and respond to what I take to be strong objections to some of *MM*'s key arguments.

Most centrally, Perkins casts doubt on the distinction between comprehension and interpretation by suggesting that there is only "overt meaning," or at least that this is the only sort that worthwhile interpretation concentrates on.[15] He begins his piece, much as Wood begins his essay in this issue, with a critical discussion. He describes a scene in *Caught* in which the protagonist Leonora tells Smith Ohlrig about her studies at a charm school. Perkins discusses how the performance and filming of the scene reveal the character's beliefs (e. g., perhaps "the thought of music reminds Leonora of some old enchantment," p. 1) and suggests the inadequacy of them ("Leonora's exposition of the value of her education also shows her ignorance of its shallowness," 1). By making this discussion a prototype of the interpretive act, Perkins seeks to show that "the meanings I have discussed in the *Caught* fragment are neither stated nor in any special sense implied. They are filmed" (4).

I think that Perkins' discussion of the *Caught* sequence is perspicuous, but his remarks do not seem to me characteristic of film interpretation. They enrich our understanding of the diegetic world: of the character's beliefs, dispositions, and personality, as well as of her characteristic behavior. Ophuls' direction and Barbara Bel Geddes' performance prompt us to make meanings, no doubt; but they are what *MM* calls "referential" meanings. That is, they are neither "explicit" nor "implicit" in the senses that I have used the terms.[16] In

sum, Perkins' discussion does not, at least in the way he broaches it, bear on the abstract meanings of Leonora's beliefs within the film, and so it fails to count as interpretation on my criterion.

So much the worse for my criterion? I don't think so. As mentioned above, criticism involves more than interpretation. I regard Perkins' discussion as a detailed description of how the characters' qualities are represented. It is far less interpretive than, say, his account of *Psycho* in *Film as Film*, which construes the shower murder as "symbolic rape" and "a symbolic rebirth."[17] His comments on *Caught* fulfill one suggestion *MM* makes: the study of how films construct referential meanings. *MM* echoes Susan Sontag's call for "a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art" (p. 264) and suggests that there is a need for studying "the process whereby a spectator constructs the film's world and the story that takes place there" (271).

Perkins would, however, dispute that anything is constructed here: he says that the scene's "meanings are filmed." I don't understand this. I understand that profilmic events, like actors sitting in a hollow car mock-up, can be filmed, but I am at a loss to understand how meanings can be filmed.[18] Perkins does not anywhere elaborate on this claim, adding immediately: "Whatever else that [his claim] means (which it is a purpose of criticism and theory to explore). . . "(4). I take it that he offers this as an intuition which critics and theorists should examine. Fair enough; but his intuition is not itself an answer to my thesis that meanings are inferred from the images and sounds on the screen. And *MM* does provide a theory to back up this claim.

Perkins goes on to assert that if meanings are filmed, "they are not hidden in or behind the movie. . . . I have written about things that I believe to be in the film for all to see, and to see the sense of" (4). Rejecting (rightly) the surface/depth and container/contents metaphors (though, oddly, claiming that I believe in them; see note 14), Perkins refuses to consider the alternative, discussed at length in the book that he is reviewing: that films are phenomenal objects which engage us in building meanings through constructive inferences guided by conventions.

Perkins does, however, take up the issue of cues. "I am sure that the screened data can not usefully be represented as pre-packaged with a determination of which items are to serve as cues" (p. 5). Yet to assert that stimuli serve as cues does not entail that they are "pre-packaged," at least if that suggests deliberate design; depth cues in the visual world are not so designed. Moreover, if Perkins means that I believe that the filmmaker is thoroughly determining the spectator's

response, then he is mistaken. I argue that spectators will often go beyond whatever the makers intended (such is the nature of elaborative inference; p. 270). I do claim, though, that filmmakers design shots and sounds and performance and everything else manifested on screen with an eye to spectators' noticing certain things more than others. Directing the viewer's attention is a large part of filmmaking craft, and I cannot see any alternative to assuming that when, say, Max Ophuls uses lighting, framing, and performance to highlight a suite of gestures that the gestures are to be perceptually salient for the spectator. In the next paragraph, Perkins substantially agrees with me on this, but goes on to suggest that some visual elements are graded in importance and others are balanced against one another. I can accept these points without abandoning a commitment to the cue-model, since everything Perkins mentions in a subsequent scene (pp. 5-6)—a gesture, a fly-swatter, the sound of dishes in the sink—does stand out as a discriminable datum for his interpretive purposes, even if he gives some less emphasis than others.

"A cue is not a cue unless it is picked up, but if we retreat to speaking only of potential cues then we are talking of everything in the film" (5). In principle, anything in a film can be a cue, just as anything in reality can be, but our perceptual and cognitive structures pre-tune our attention to what is likely to be significant. Human figures are more important—certainly to Hollywood filmmakers and to Perkins—than out-of-focus shadows in back projection, but that is not to say that a filmmaker might not make those shadows salient through other cues, and through invoking alternative mental structures.

Perkins' comments on cues suggests, finally, one source of difference between his views and mine. To speak of "filming meanings" and straightforwardly "seeing" the meaning of characters' actions suggests that he may be assuming something like a "direct perception" account of the spectator's activity. There are some standard debates around this, but I would simply argue here that as articulated in his review, this position does not offer any explanations for how it is that people are able to make sense of a film in the way Perkins claims.

MM, along with other work of mine, does try to offer an explanation. Roughly, it goes this way: Perception is both bottom-up (data-driven, mandatory, fast, and minimally mediated by cognitive structures) and top-down (concept-driven, flexible, more deliberative, and strongly mediated by conceptual structures). Interpretation is very much a top-down process, involving schemata, semantic fields, and heuristics (*MM*, 3-4). But it too remains data-driven and depends upon

perceiving cues; otherwise there would be no problem with recalcitrant data (see above). Some perception, for all intents and purposes, can be considered "direct," such as a clunk on the head. But other perceptual acts are highly mediated by knowledge and judgment, and the cognitive activities of interpretation seem to be prime candidates (see choice-point 5 above).

Most broadly of all, Perkins and I agree on a great deal of what criticism does. He maintains, justly, that critics disagree by virtue of values as well as facts, holding differing "beliefs about the appropriate viewing perspective which are grounded inevitably in history" (6). We also agree that criticism cannot be put on a "sensible footing" in the sense that we could legislate rules, proofs, and ironclad logic. (Perkins thinks I argue for such a chimera, but that's because he misses my irony in the passage cited; p. 255.) What *MM* tries to do is show what creates both critical agreement and disagreement; how beliefs about "appropriate viewing perspectives" function; why rules and proofs are out of place, in this sort of activity. *MM*'s account of critical reasoning tries to provide an explanation of how film interpretation works—its presuppositions, conventions, procedures—and has worked in history. In other words, what enables a critic like Perkins to grant that his interpretation is shaped by "beliefs about the appropriate viewing perspective" while still maintaining that when he understands a character's action he grasps something in the film "for all to see, and to see the sense of"? Perkins grants that we do not yet know how such a thing is possible, but I cannot see that he shows that *MM*'s cognitive model fails to point toward a plausible answer.

5.

I have so far touched only on the "substantive" part of *MM*: its theory and analysis of film interpretation. But there is a polemical part as well. It is in a sense detachable from the analytical part, as some reviewers have recognized, but it has left many readers with their strongest impressions.

Briefly, I argue that film criticism has suffered from its concentration on interpretation, and that film analysis ought to receive more attention. Very skilful critics (*MM* cites Farber, Bazin, the *Movie* group, and others) can still be exciting, but the proliferation of film interpretations, and the academicization of interpretive practices, have made most of critical writing fairly predictable. I suggest that we can ask other questions—about historical context and social reception, about style and structure, about how people perceive and understand films—and these can usefully illuminate cinema as well.

Note that this is not a call for an end to interpreting films. It is not asserting that interpretation is always and utterly unenlightening. It is not, as Perkins incorrectly assumes, a call for a "scientific" ("clocks-and-not-clouds") criticism (6). It is not an assault on educational missions, the importance of critical evaluation, or the discipline of film studies.[19]

Imagine that art history consisted principally of research into emblematic and allegorical imagery, or music history of the study of how great ideas are represented in music. It would be justifiable to suggest that we also ought to study painting styles or musical structures, and the ways that they have changed through history. Of course art history and music history have long and powerful traditions of studying form—so powerful that new currents in each discipline are urging a "hermeneutic turn" toward interpretation. But film study presents something of an inverse case. I therefore argue, as one alternative to interpretation, for a "historical poetics" of film which concentrates on how form, style, and meaning interact in defined circumstances.

This in itself is no radical departure. While interpretation has a long history in scriptural and legal exegesis, there are traditions in which analysis, in the sense I have been using the concept, has been dominant. Ancient Greek theory of literature, and not only in Aristotle's *Poetics*, was "centripetal" in its lack of interest in unifying themes and overarching meanings.[20] Russian Formalism and some versions of French Structuralism focused more on norms and conventions of composition and style than on interpreting texts. Some contemporary film scholars share these tendencies, as *MM* indicates (pp. 263-274).

I do not deny, however, that *MM* suggests that within the profession, film interpretation has become routinized. One can quicken undergraduates' interest with critical moves that are long-practiced, but one's students are not one's professional peers. I find most interpretations offered up right now intellectually unexciting. *MM* tries to suggest some reasons for holding this view, and some readers have quietly agreed with them, but I have no illusions that I can persuade many. My view is and always will be a minority position in the humanities. But dissatisfaction with one mode of discourse can spur one to explore others, and this is my hope in making a polemical case in *MM*.

6.

Film studies is far broader a domain than interpretation, or even criticism. More than ever before, the study of film embraces a wide range of topics and approaches. We are getting reliable accounts of production, and even exhibition, in many countries and periods; we

are understanding genres in a variety of cultures and subcultures; we are writing sound and sensitive histories of technology and industrial processes. Nonetheless, film criticism and interpretation remain the central activities of academic, journalistic, and "quality" writing about cinema.

Several commentators in this issue deplore the cycle of "fashionable" theories. I may be alone in believing that film theory as a distinct activity has played a comparatively small role in recent years. I assume theoretical inquiry to be an attempt to answer questions about the nature, functions, and effects of some general cinematic phenomenon. As part of this enterprise, the theorist analyzes concepts and arguments already in play. Paradigmatic instances of film theory are Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*, Andre Bazin's "Theatre and Cinema" essay, Christian Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier," Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Stephen Heath's *Questions of Cinema*, and Noël Carroll's *Mystifying Movies*.

I think it fair to say that very few such publications have lately graced our field. Most "theoretical" writings are film interpretations which apply theoretical doctrines articulated elsewhere. The characteristic structure, either of book or article, is to lay out some propositions derived from a theory, proceed to interpret the film in the light of the theory, and then conclude with an appraisal of the theory's usefulness or the film's ability to illuminate the theory. In addition, to speak of applying a single theory is misleading, for characteristically these interpretations are quite eclectic in their appropriation of concepts, terms, and arguments. One finds, for instance, "use-value" and "defamiliarizing" used in the same essay as "the split subject" and "liminality." Not only do the concepts go unanalyzed, but their disparate and even conflicting doctrinal sources are not acknowledged. This is a fairly constant feature of interpretive criticism throughout the ages.

There is reason to believe that this genre of "theory-based" interpretive writing is the most prominent one within academic film studies. It may not be numerically the greatest, but it certainly commands conferences, conventions, and prestigious journals. In *MM* I try to show that even this sort of writing relies on pretheoretical and cross-theoretical concepts and tactics, and that these bind rather than differentiate critical schools. Here, however, I want simply to call attention to this theory-based interpretation as a central tendency in the discipline.

Often this approach is allied to political positions which can be broadly characterized as left-wing dissent. The interpreter may assume that the theory or theories have extratextual implications, and that

interpreting the film will bring them out. This is again, an ancient hermeneutical assumption. It is now employed to generate or reaffirm a political critique. Interpretations which amalgamate theoretical precepts with left-wing political and cultural criticism came to prominence in the field in the 1970s, and they have become a mainstay of disciplinary activity.

In the United States, then, "the field," as a professional discipline operating outside an individual professor's classroom, is dominated by a scholarly practice in which "reading films" is central. This practice is, doctrinally, somewhat pluralistic. (There are a few Jungians and Derrideans out there.) Still, the interpretive core is occupied by two strains: a "humanistic" one; and a broadly "critical," left-dissenting one relying more overtly on theoretical doctrines. The latter tendency seems evidently salient at the moment, and within this strain feminism and ethnicity- and gender-based theories currently play pivotal roles.

Someone may object that the 1970s period of high theory has come to an end and now theories are invoked chiefly when they are useful in helping us interpret texts "historically." I would simply note that, first, history is often invoked under the rubric of theories of history (e. g., Hayden White, Baudrillard, etc.); and second, that historical data are often utilized as evidence for theories of sexuality, culture, or the like.

What led to this state? I would hypothesize that the causes are not too different from the processes which led to the rise of "humanistic" interpretive frameworks in the film studies of the 1960s and early 1970s. Centering on the interpretation of films gives the discipline an obvious affiliation with other text-centered humanistic fields (notably literary studies and art history). New Criticism, the dominant influence on postwar Anglo-American interpretation, became a central model for film studies (*MM*, 48-53). As left intellectuals established themselves in the academy, and as subcultures previously considered "marginal" became more vocal in political spheres and popular culture, partisan interpretive positions become more salient in film studies. Indeed, film studies, as a young field, was somewhat ahead of more traditional disciplines in giving a central place to ideology-based criticism and theory. What Wood describes as the Club has a sizeable portion, perhaps a majority, in which his vision of left-wing pedagogy would be considered orthodox.

Let us assume, however, that, as many claim, the field is quite pluralistic and decentered. If this is so, we are confronted with the spectacle of people seeking to mark out idiosyncratic positions by constructing an orthodox view from which they may signal divergence.

I think it is fair to say that my work is often taken to incarnate this orthodoxy. Everyone is the hero of his or her own autobiography, but finding myself amid essays in which professors share with us their pedagogical triumphs, their college catalogues, and their intensive reviewing of videotapes, I think I'm allowed two personal paragraphs.

Several essays—Wood's here, one by Ray (cited in his essay), many by other hands—assert that my work typifies academic film studies.[21] This is sheer fantasy. Very few scholars adhere to the positions I have articulated on Ozu and Dreyer, on the nature of narration, on story and style in the Hollywood film, on the process of film interpretation, and on the usefulness of form-based film analysis. Very few scholars share the research project of historical poetics, and even fewer of those pursuing it would agree with my formulation of it. As with any scholar's contentions, mine have been open to test, revision, appraisal, and critique.[22] In fact, I daresay that no film scholar's work has received sharper, more vociferous, and more angry criticism than has mine—viz. not only the Wood, Britton, and Perkins articles already discussed, but essays and books by scholars writing from virtually all intellectual and political positions and representing prominent journals, academic institutions, and professional associations.[23] Wood complains, without citing any evidence, that my conclusions provide scholars opportunities to crank out mechanical copies. Virtually all the evidence I've seen indicates that my conclusions have provided writers opportunities to generate a host of objections.

In one sense this is not surprising. I have asked questions which matter to me in the hope that they matter to some others, and I have tried to pursue the questions rigorously and set out the answers in persuasive fashion. But my answers have not hewed to any of the dominant positions articulated within the field. (It is here that Wood should look for essays which have generated endlessly proliferating "applications.") To claim that the results have come to typify or command the discipline is preposterous; to use this claim to glamorize one's own purported radicality is self-serving.

Still, I would be the last to deny that people can interpret things in different fashions. This issue of *Film Criticism* illustrates the startlingly diverse ways in which film critics read books. For Robin Wood my work epitomizes business as usual, the grooves of Academe. To David Cook, though, my work threatens thirty years of discipline-building, and *MM* is a book that no dean should be allowed to read.*

**Note to deans considering purchasing* MM: *Please ignore this objection. Discounts on bulk orders available.*

For Robert Ray, *MM* signals my perennial positivist thirst for comprehensiveness; yet Rick Altman finds it too narrow, in that it ignores such material constraints as publishers' desires to print books which sell.[24]

Film interpretation is in no crisis; it is in stagnation. As *MM* indicates, I believe this to be due to the centrality of fairly routinized critical practices. The state of things could be improved by recognizing that the pursuit of knowledge is central to an academic field. Knowledge consists not only of information but also of conceptual structures, modes of inquiry, and practices of problem-solving and question-answering. In this pursuit, some non-teleological conception of progress—if only the elimination of error, of untenable theories, of partial questions and answers—is indispensable. We have indisputably made progress in our understanding of film history; we have made, I am convinced, some progress in film theory. If there is no progress in film criticism, it is because scholars have not examined the models and methods they deploy and have not resolved to improve on them. I remain convinced that historically and theoretically informed analytical research into how films are designed and used offers one path to a richer, more expanded, knowledge-based criticism.

References

I am grateful to Kristin Thompson for comments on this paper, and to Noël Carroll and his seminar students for their probing and demanding criticisms of *Making Meaning* during the fall term of 1992 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

[1] Some recent discussions, since *MM*, include K. M. Newton, *Interpreting the Text* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990); Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Talbot J. Taylor, *Mutual Misunderstanding: Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); and Umberto Eco et al., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[2] Joseph Margolis argues for the "plausibility" position in *Art and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 1980), pp. 107-164.

[3] For my part, I believe that there are false interpretations, and there are approximately true ones; yet we would want to call some interpretations more or less plausible in the sense in that we cannot decide about their truth or falsity.

[4] See for example Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), particularly Chapters 1-4.

[5] Perhaps David Cook, in his paper in this issue, believes that I do not distinguish among these sorts of practices in writing and teaching about cinema. I regard Cook's and Bernstein's work as predominantly film history, while Studlar's combines both theory and criticism. I take it that David Cook does distinguish among theory, history, and criticism, and in this we agree.

[5] Something like this seems to be going on in Janet Staiger's critique of the narrow usage of the term in *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 18-21. I cannot see, though, that she offers any reasons for why we would not want to make the distinction. Instead, her argument consists of quotations and paraphrases from various critics who claim that the distinction cannot be maintained. But none of these writers addresses the case that there is a difference between concrete, denoted meanings and abstract, implicit or symptomatic ones, in the sense I mean here; and most use "interpretation" in the broad sense, not the narrow one I urge.

[7] The most cogent statement is in Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), pp. 75-77, 401-411.

[8] A good part of my practical criticism has been devoted to trying to show that it's not.

[9] In his essay in this issue, Edward Branigan finds my analogy between critical interpretation and parlor magic misleading, since interpretation does not produce an illusion. It was meant, like this one, to emphasize that interpretation is a skill, so that even if you distrust the particular interpretation produced, or even remain skeptical about the entire process of interpretation, you will probably acknowledge that some skill is necessary to produce one.

[10] On the cognitive components in emotion, see Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), and Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). A cognitive theory of emotion in cinema is proposed in Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 60-88.

[11] See, for a more detailed account of this perspective, my "A

Case for Cognitivism," *Iris* no. 9 (Spring 1989):11- 40, and "A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections," *Iris* no. 11 (Summer 1990): 107-112.

[12] See, for a discussion, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

[13] That is, the Club. For the reasons already adduced, I cannot see that Wood makes as radical a break with academic film study as he maintains, since he does not repudiate any of the materials or procedures of interpretation as currently practiced. Nor does the purport of the interpretations themselves break the mold of many academic "readings." Moreover, I would argue that Wood's political position is shared by many in the professional coterie he rejects. He mentions postmodernism and neoformalism as offending trends, but by anybody's estimate these are minority movements in academic film studies. Taken all in all, Wood's views are shared by a great many members of the Club.

[14] The essay is V. F. Perkins, "Must We Say What They Mean? Film Criticism and Interpretation," *Movie* no. 34/ 35 (Winter 1990), pp. 1-6. Some illustrative misconstruals are:

(a) Perkins presents *MM* as claiming that implied meanings are "concealed" (2); "Bordwell 's account is absolutely bound to a view of the interpreting critic as a propounder of hidden meanings" (3). But the book is at pains to suggest from the first pages forward (pp. 2-3) that the model of hidden meanings offers a mistaken metaphor for what the critic produces; meanings are inferred, not disclosed.

(b) Perkins claims that in seeing criticism as rhetorical, I am bound to judge it badly because I claim that rhetorical proofs cannot be logical (4). He even claims that I "demand that interpretation follow formal rules of inference" (5). But *MM* explains that logical proofs may not hold sway in critical rhetoric; enthymemes are far more important, and properly so (pp. 208-212). Similarly, heuristics, as quick and dirty reasoning processes, may have logical faults, but they serve their purposes well (pp. 137-142).

(c) *MM* proposes that critics' interpretations posit "model films" built out of the original film, but Perkins claims that this reflects a "familiar scepticism" in film studies": "nothing suggests what the model could approximate to, in a world which might or might not contain films themselves" (3). Yet *MM* postulates that intersubjectively critics and readers share schemata and institutional frameworks through which they grasp the world and its films; the model film approximates to the film as comprehended under shared schemata: the model film is "a

thinned-out revision of the film as comprehended" (p. 142). When Perkins asks that we test his critical claims by reference to our experience of the film—its story, its characterization, and the like—he is relying on just this intersubjective understanding.

(d) *MM* claims that novelty and plausibility govern critics' efforts to make a publicly accessible interpretation within the film-critical institution. Perkins calls these criteria "market-oriented" and indicates that plausibility is "the charlatan's measure of credulity in the audience" (4). Perkins goes on to examine a scene in *Caught* as an example of "the degree to which the whole is illuminated by a critic's account of the parts and the logic of the configuration" (4), and he suggests that *MM* should recognize attempts to account for pattern and detail as part of the criteria. But *MM* clearly indicates that novelty includes such matters as "point(ing) out significant aspects which previous commentators have ignored or minimized" (30); this is surely what most critics seek to do. Perkins would not have dwelt upon the scene in *Caught* if the aspects he perceived as salient had been sufficiently noted before. This is novelty, but not of the dime-store variety. Moreover, plausibility as a criterion includes such matters as accuracy of data and recognition of pattern (pp. 31-33). Plausibility has nothing to do with pulling the wool over the reader's eyes.

(e) Perkins gives me a drubbing for suggesting, as above, that a critic could consider the "explicit" meaning of *The Wizard of Oz* to be reducible to the film's final line. He suggests that this would be bad interpretation (2). But the passage exemplifies comprehension, not interpretation (*MM*, 8-10). He goes on to suggest many mitigating factors working against this final line as an adequate summary of the film's meanings. What he does, in effect, is propose some implicit meanings which counterweight the literal meaning one might ascribe to this line. This is exactly what interpreters are supposed to do, and it is exactly why I claim that interpretation as a practice elaborates cues in order to go beyond "literal" meanings ascribed to the film.

[15] I think there is some ambiguity here. Perkins suggests that some critical examples I adduce in *MM* are examples of "delusion" and "parody," and that others are "poor specimens" or unrepresentative examples "in the Aunt Sally frame" (p. 3). He does not say what causes the failures in these critics' work, but I suspect they do not exhibit an attention to the overt meanings Perkins claims to be the object of interpretation.

[16] In his essay in this issue, Branigan suggests that there are problems with referential meaning: it seems very broad and fuzzy to

him. It is indeed, and I am far from having worked out how it could be made more tractable. At its broadest compass, it includes all sorts of "world knowledge"—what some linguists call the "mental encyclopedia"—as it is put to the effort of construing the events and states of affairs in the world posited by the film. To sort this out one would need a full-blown theory of cinematic representation, of cinematic structure, and of the process by which these factors are engaged by the spectator. All *MM* seeks to do is to indicate that this area exists and poses its own particular sort of problems.

As for three particular problems Branigan raises:

(a) I would argue that film techniques and indeed, all discriminable features of the phenomenal text, are sources of cues for either comprehension or interpretation or both.

(b) For the purposes of *MM* I take "effects" to include all possible responses we can ascribe to the film viewer, and propose to treat meanings as one (large) class of effects. There are non-meaningful effects: the perception of color or pattern, "hard-wired" responses to certain cues (e. g., the phi phenomenon, or the startle response evoked by sudden blasts of music or noise in a thriller). There are also effects which involve the ascription of non-interpretive meanings (referential and explicit, on the typology under discussion).

(c) Interpretive meaning can aid in our comprehension of a text in several ways, touched on in passing throughout *MM* and *Narration in the Fiction Film*. For example, in allegory symbolic values may clarify action or states of affairs in the fictional world. Or in "art films," obscurities of character motivation may require a consideration of thematic implications which may then lead the perceiver to attribute motives to the character.

[17] *Film as Film* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972), pp. 110-112.

[18] I also don't know how to square it with what I take to be a basic view set forth in Perkins' book *Film as Film*. There he claims that the spectator construes the image as fiction: "The particular magic of the narrative film is to make us put an inaccurate construction on an accurate series of images...It is we who convert images into assertions. The cinema shows us a man holding a pistol at his head, squeezing the trigger, and falling to the floor. This is precisely what happened. But we fictionalize this documentary image when we claim to have seen a man committing suicide" (p. 67). If the camera only presents a "documentary image," how can it film meanings? And if the spectator contributes fictionality to what is presented on the screen, why does not the

spectator contribute meanings as well? In general, I find much of *Film as Film* completely congruent with the views posited in *MM*, so I am surprised that Perkins adopts the line he does in his review.

[19] David Cook's comments to the contrary represent a misunderstanding of my position. A few quick examples: *MM* spends several pages (pp. 255-258) adducing some benefits of interpretation. Cook ignores these. I do not say that evaluation (the making of "informed critical judgements") is out of bounds at all. I do not say that interpretive criticism is not successful in the classroom; it is in fact eminently teachable (*MM*, 22-25). *MM* denies the opposition between "form" and "meaning" and certainly does not say that meaning is "incidental or simply irrelevant." (Any analysis of comprehension will involve meanings.) I would also ask readers of Cook's persuasion to look at my own practical criticism of Dreyer, Ozu, Eisenstein, and other directors; there they will find plenty of interpretations, but ones blended with considerations of form, style, and history. I am happy that someone is studying these Eastern European films closely, and I have no doubt that they can be interpreted. I also find it plausible that viewers found them implicit or explicit allegories of political situations. *MM* claims to be able to show how Cook's interpretations of *Shadows* and *The Shock* are generated by the materials and procedures available within the institution's traditions.

[20] See Malcolm Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 3-8.

[21] By invoking one such critique, Andrew Britton's attack on *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Robin Wood puts me in a double bind: On this occasion there can be no question of responding adequately to Britton's long and dense essay. If I don't respond, however, I will be charged with once more having evaded this decisive refutation of my argument. I did not discover Britton's critique until nearly a year, after *CineAction!*'s date of publication, too late for a timely response. I do intend, however, to address some of his objections in a forthcoming study of the theory of film style.

More generally, suffice it to say that the accumulating criticism of my work has obliged me to make a choice. Do I spend a great deal of time responding immediately to critiques (a process which, as in the essay you are reading, inevitably requires the correcting of misunderstandings and inaccuracies)? Or do I reflect on the criticism, take what I find useful in it, and press ahead with new work? More and more I have chosen the latter. The very existence of the essay you are reading indicates that I have not shut myself off from debates, but I do not think

it is unreasonable to limit my participation in them.

This decision has also been affected by the fact that when I have sought to respond to criticisms, I have almost invariably found journal editors highly unwilling to provide opportunities. Most editors are reluctant to take up space with rebuttals, and virtually none are willing to grant a rejoinder equal space and timely publication. A prominent British journal published a critique of my work; when I requested a brief space to respond, the editor asked whether, since another critique was planned for a forthcoming issue, wouldn't I prefer to reply to that instead? When I asked to respond to the forthcoming critique in the same issue as the critique itself, the editor never answered my letter. This issue of *Film Criticism* is literally the only occasion in which I have been granted the scholarly courtesy (utterly standard in other fields) of replying to peers' commentary within the same pages. Faced with the demands of time and the reluctance of journals to engage in debate, I have been obliged to assume that readers understand a publishing convention: when a journal prints a critique of a scholar's project and does not invite the scholar to reply, the reader is to take that critique as unanswered, but not necessarily unanswerable.

[22] As examples of scholars testing, criticizing, and revising some of my arguments, see Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 5-12, and Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 15-22.

[23] A quick scan of some indexes would turn up extensive critiques of my work in books and journal essays published in the US, Canada, the UK, France, Germany, and Australia. More specifically, Robin Wood could not have picked a worse example of a book which has supposedly received veneration. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* has been attacked in both the *TLS* (by a leading neoconservative) and *Screen* (on many occasions; one might even say routinely). The same book was the object of extensive critique in a 1989 issue of a literary journal, *South Atlantic Quarterly*. (Incidentally, the editor of this collection did not make it possible for me to respond in the issue.)

[24] Some of these interpretive divergences might be explained by the principles of rhetoric set forth in *MM*.